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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/22/15

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR BO

SUBJECT: Single Opposition Candidate Convention Almost A Reality

Ref: Minsk 836

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The 10+ coalition leaders are frantically making the final preparations for the single candidate convention, which will take place in Minsk October 1-2. The approximately 900 delegates will select one of the four candidates to be the single candidate on the second day of the congress. The 10+ candidates and convention organizers recently discussed the details of the convention with Ambassador, stressing they have gone to great lengths to make the congress an event around which all members of the democratic opposition could rally. If the GOB allows the congress to proceed as scheduled, the election of a single candidate will clearly represent a positive development in the opposition camp, especially if they genuinely achieve unity. But the hardest test remains Q can the opposition candidate attract support from the people. Here the opposition will have to change tactics and focus more on establishing direct contact with voters than on organizing themselves. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On September 26, Ambassador and Pol/Econ Chief met with the four candidates of the 10+ Coalition Q Anatoliy Lebedko, head of the United Civic Party (UCP), Sergey Kalyakin, head of the pro-democracy Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC), Stanislav Shushkevich, former head of state and leader of a surviving fraction of the Belarusian Social-Democratic Party Hramada, and Aleksandr Milinkevich, leader of the Belarusian Association of Resource Centers, who was nominated by the Green Party and the nationalist Belarusian Popular Front (BPF). The candidates were accompanied by congress organizers and coalition leaders Aleksandr Bukvostov, leader of the de-registered Belarusian Party of Labor, and Vinchuk Vyachorka, head of the BPF. The 10+ coalition leaders reviewed their plans for the October 1-2 single candidate convention and stressed their intention to unite all democratic forces.

Organizers Slowly But Surely Develop A Schedule of Events

¶3. (SBU) The 10+ leaders could offer Ambassador little concrete information on the schedule of the congress at the time of their meeting, but Bukvostov was able to provide a

general overview of events. Activities on October 1 will include an election of election committee and speeches by congress organizers, political party leaders, NGO representatives, and several invited guests. On October 2 the program will consist of speeches prepared by the candidates, a session for the delegates to pose questions to the candidates, the election of the single candidate, a press conference given by the single candidate and his campaign team, and a music concert. Bukvostov added that the organizers of the convention will be conducting press interviews on both days to keep local and international press informed of developments.

¶4. (SBU) The congress organizers passed to the Embassy on September 28 a draft agenda for the convention, which tracks closely with what the organizers told Ambassador two days earlier. On October 1, the congress will commence at 2pm (local time) and end at 7pm. On October 2, the congress will resume its program at 9:30am, the first round of voting will occur at 11:30am, the second round (if necessary) will be at 2pm, and the congress will officially end around 9pm (following the music concert).

¶5. (U) The candidates and organizers of the convention announced they will be conducting a press conference at the Belarusian Popular Front headquarters on September 30 to discuss the purpose and details of the congress. Lebedko expected only independent media will show up for the press conference.

Voting Procedures Decided

¶6. (U) Organizers invited around 900 people to participate as delegates in the congress, although the organizers were still not sure how many delegates would show up for the event. Delegates will include those chosen from the approximately 147 local conventions held throughout the country, NGO representatives, political party representatives, former members of the 12th and 13th Supreme Soviets, editors of democratic newspapers, and VIPs (national poets, writers, wives of the disappeared, etc.) (reftel). The convention organizers recently decided that a candidate must gain 50 percent plus one vote to win the 10+ nomination for presidential candidate in the 2006 elections. A runoff election will be held if none of the contenders receives enough votes in the first round.

Everyone Invited to Congress, Except for GOB Officials

¶7. (SBU) Bukvostov handed the Ambassador a personal invitation to the congress, and stressed all foreign diplomats were requested to attend the congress. Aside from members of the diplomatic community, Shushkevich noted local independent and state press, foreign press, and foreign government officials were also sent invitations. (Note: Ambassador and the 13 EU HOMs will be attending the congress together to show united support for the congress and possibly to deter GOB-orchestrated shenanigans. Currently, the ambassadors' plans are to observe the beginning and closing ceremonies, including the election of the single candidate. Post will field several Emboffs to cover the entire event.)

¶8. (SBU) Ambassador asked the organizers whether representatives of the government were invited to observe the congress. All were reluctant to answer the question, but Bukvostov finally said the GOB was not invited to the congress because it is strictly a gathering of democratic forces.

Opposition Forces Attempt To Unite

¶19. (SBU) On September 27, the 10+ coalition leaders signed an agreement with leaders of the non-party opposition movement to unify forces sometime during the electoral process and select from among them a single candidate to run against President Lukashenko. Non-party opposition signatories of the agreement included former Speaker of the Council of the Republic Alexander Voitovich, former National Lyceum Rector Vladimir Kolas, former MP Valery Frolov, and former Agricultural Minister Vasiliy Leonov. (Note: Anatoly Fyoderov, close advisor to Voitovich, recently told Pol/Econ Chief the selection of the single candidate to represent the entire opposition movement will occur immediately following the official registration of all presidential candidates, which will not take place until six weeks prior to election day.)

¶10. (SBU) Congress organizers told the Ambassador during their September 26 meeting the 10+ Coalition was sincerely interested in coordinating activities with all members of the opposition movement. Shushkevich cited as proof the decision to grant interested leaders of the non-party opposition Q including Voitovich, Frolov, and Leonov Q delegate status to the convention. Kalyakin noted Aleksandr Kozulin, head of Belarusian Social Democratic Party Hrmada and another likely contender for presidency, will not participate in the convention due to travel plans outside of Belarus. (Comment: Kozulin's absence from the congress is not coincidental. He consistently has been critical of the congress and the 10+ candidates.) Despite some setbacks, the 10+ leaders were optimistic they could reach a real agreement on greater unity.

Television Coverage of Congress Is Key

¶11. (SBU) Lebedko, Kalyakin, and Shushkevich emphasized the importance of gaining access to state media. The convention organizers have sent letters to the state television stations to request they attend and broadcast the congress. The 10+ leaders recognize that state media has portrayed the single candidate process as a farce, but the leaders are convinced the benefits of having the congress broadcast throughout Belarus outweigh the political costs.

¶12. (SBU) Kalyakin noted the 10+ leaders would be traveling to Moscow this week to participate in a televised conference on Belarus. They hope the event will provide an opportunity for Russian media to carry information on the convention, which will reach audiences in Russia and perhaps in Belarus. Shushkevich, however, said he did not plan on attending the conference because he believes Russian media has already thrown its support behind Lukashenko and the congress would therefore be portrayed in a negative manner.

USG Assistance Requested

¶13. (C) Kalyakin asked the Ambassador about the possibility of the USG providing money to the congress organizers for the purchase of a printing machine. The machine would be used to print the coalition's own information bulletins about the single candidate process and convention. Ambassador advised the leaders to seek such assistance through NGO donors (and privately advised them to raise it with their IRI advisor).

¶14. (C) Ambassador discussed with the coalition leaders the possibility of American journalists in Washington conducting an interview of opposition leaders via digital conferencing technology. Holding such a press conference could help keep the international spotlight focused on Belarus. The interview could be scheduled within the next several weeks. The 10+ leaders expressed strong interest

in the idea and thanked Ambassador for continued U.S. support.

GOB Cooperative, Thus Far

¶115. When asked to what extent Minsk city and security officials have cooperated with the organizers of the congress, the coalition leaders said the GOB has been unusually cooperative. The authorities have resolved, or are in the process of resolving, all pending logistical and security issues. However, the congress organizers and candidates were convinced government cooperation was based on ulterior motives.

¶116. Vyachorka and others suspected Lukashenko wanted the congress held in Minsk to be able to exert greater control over the event. Some coalition leaders worried that the GOB would erect last-minute administrative or legal barriers to prevent the congress from taking place or finishing as scheduled. Others believed the government will call on state-controlled organizations, such as the Belarusian Republican Youth Council (BRSM), to organize demonstrations outside the congress and possibly disrupt the event. Bukvostov, who has worked closely with city officials on the planning of the event, attempted to assuage the fears of the other coalition leaders by reminding the group that the GOB thus far has cooperated fully with the congress organizers. Bukvostov suggested the 10+ leaders should focus more on putting together a successful congress, and not on what the government might do to disrupt it.

EU Approach to External Broadcasting Not The Answer

¶117. (SBU) Vyachorka raised with Ambassador rumors that the EU will grant its tender for an external broadcasting project to foreign NGOs such as BBC, Radio Free Europe, or Deutsche Welle. He argued the broadcasting should be handled by a Belarusian group Q i.e., Belarusians speaking to Belarusians. Kalyakin added that a foreign group running a radio station would be a waste of money. Ambassador noted their concerns, but responded that at least the EU has taken steps to address the information vacuum.

Comment

¶118. (C) The 10+ leaders have clearly been working hard to organize a successful and highly visible single candidate convention. The question arises to what extent will the single candidate convention spark an interest in the democratic movement among the masses. Many political observers, regional part and NGO leaders, and members of the diplomatic community have told us the single candidate convention clearly represents a step forward. However, civil society and diplomatic interlocutors criticize the 10+ candidates, and the democratic opposition in general, for not devoting enough attention to voters.

¶119. (C) The single candidate convention is indeed a positive development, representing a clear effort to establish unity among the opposition. While not perfect, the process, facilitated by US NGOs IRI and NDI, has helped teach the parties the act of compromise and has given them valuable experience in organizing a congress. Still, the next step Q reaching out to the voters Q will be the toughest test. Notwithstanding GOB repression, the opposition has yet to establish consistent contact with voters and, equally important, they have yet to develop an attractive campaign platform. After the congress, opposition must focus their efforts less on internal

matters and courting foreign donors and more on
implementing creative methods for rallying public support
under the tough conditions of dictatorship.

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